

# **Participation at school level: a right and a challenge**

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## 1. Introduction

'**Democracy**' refers to a government chosen by the people, whether it is direct or representative.

**Decentralization** is the transfer or allocation of **powers and responsibilities** by a higher authority to a lower authority

**Deregulation** is a process of simplifying, scaling down or eliminating regulations issued by the central authority

**Participation:** is the process (legally or non legally) by which teachers (and other stakeholders) have influence on the decisions taken in function of their work and the conditions of their work.



# Case Study

## **1. School with elementary and infant education**

Students = 520

Teachers = 27

Director has much autonomy in field of education and organisation

Director has 13 year experience

## 2. Participatory bodies

Direct participation:

Individual: evaluation questionnaire

Collective:

discussion

workgroups

staff meeting

Indirect participation

institutional: LOC (union involved)  
School Council

not institutional: -

## **First two weeks of July all teachers work on:**

- school work plan
- safety plan
- in service training plan
- list of priorities of targets

Relying on questionnaire among teachers

## **Institutional participation: the Participation Council**

- Members: 2 teachers (also parents, community, organizing authority)
- Teachers: repetition of other meetings)

## **Institutional participation: LOC**

members: two teachers; one of them is a union delegate

Union workgroup: four teachers



- **Collective direct participation: staff meeting**

Meetings: every month; duration: two hours; agenda is fixed in the beginning of the year

- **Collective direct participation: working groups**

10 working groups; meeting every month; each teacher is obliged to be a member of at least one working group

- **Collective direct participation: deliberation**

weekly deliberation among teachers of the same grade;  
last one hour; is part of the job of the teachers

- **Individual direct participation: evaluation questionnaire**

### **3. Situational conditions**

1. HRM

2. Communication

3. Style of leadership

4. Decision-making process

4.1. General pattern

- decisions are taken by teachers in discussion with the director and realised by the teachers; discussions about organisation of the yearly recurrent activities are discussed by working groups
- Every year the questionnaire is used to evaluate the actions.



## 4.2. Specific decision-making

### **Strengths**

- if there is a problem, a fast reaction is possible
- participation and deliberation is the basis of collegiality; pleasant working climate.
- participation and deliberation contribute to strong and continuous attitude of concern about the school.
- teachers know what's going on in the school. This creates a strong attitude of commitment to the school and a strong collaboration among teachers.
- this collaboration also helped the director to do her job.

### **Some Notes**

- participation is well structured in this school, but not so much formalised.
- participation is stimulated by making free the time for discussion among teachers of the same grade

## 2. What is school-based management?

### Allocating to schools more decision-making authority

**Administrative Control SBM** is aimed at increasing accountability to the central district or board office for the efficient expenditure of resources, on the assumption that such efficiencies will eventually pay off for students

**Professional Control SBM** puts teachers in the decision-making “driver’s seat” for the purpose of making better use of their knowledge in such key decision areas as budget, curriculum, and (occasionally) personnel

**Community Control SBM** is aimed at increasing accountability to parents and the community at large, along with “consumer satisfaction” more generally



- Professional Control SBM appears to have more positive effects on the practices of teachers than either of the other two forms, and no more negative effects. Since teachers' practices have a direct effect on students, Professional Control SBM appears to hold the greatest promise for contributing to student growth.
- Professional Control SBM is the most likely form of SBM to increase professional accountability to parents and the wider community.
- the promise of SBM lies in its stimulation of more participative forms of management and greatly increased involvement of those lower in the organizational hierarchy
- four central requirements for legitimate participation – knowledge and skill, power, information, and rewards



## **Additional demands for a successful school-based management**

- the school needs the chance to take decisions concerning the budget, curriculum and personnel;
- the participation structure should give decision-making power to all parts of the school;
- development of knowledge and skills should keep the attention permanently;
- successful schools will collect information about the internal functioning of the school, the effectiveness of the school and about new methods;
- these tasks are demanding for teachers, therefore teachers should be rewarded;
- directors of successful schools will have a participatory management style;
- schools need a mission;
- professional networks should be established

# 3. Management styles and leadership

Educational institutions need five leadership forces

- Human leadership
- Structural leadership
- Political leadership
  - refers to the leadership that builds alliances and coalitions, encourages **participation and collaboration in decision-making**, and resolves conflicts among constituencies.
- Cultural leadership
- Educational leadership



## Two models of decision-making:

- the supervision model
- the participatory model

### 1. The supervision model

### 2. The participation model

The director grants participation to the teachers about things belonging to their job. Moreover, the teachers are responsible for their decisions.

## Three essential characteristics of a participative leader:

1. The educational leaders **should give direction**
2. A participatory leader **delegates authority to his collaborators**
3. A participatory leader shall also **fulfil a facilitating function**



# 4. Decision-making procedures

Five steps

- Information
- Preparation
- Decision-making
- Realisation
- Evaluation

Depending on the situation there are **different styles of decision-making**:

**-Top down decision-making**

- **consultation**: the director asks for a advice from the staff about a proposal made up by the direction
- **bottom up consultation**: staff is asked for advice, direction takes decision
- **take part in deciding**: proposals are discussed by as many as possible and later on decisions are taken
- **delegation with veto**: teachers may take a decision, but the director keeps the right to refuse
- **pure delegation**: teachers are totally free to decide whatever they want.

# 5. Participation

## 1. What?

**Participation is a process by which employees can influence, legally or illegally, the decisions that have to be taken in relation to their work and the conditions under which they are working.**

## 2. Contents

In school management two domains are important:

- the domain of administration
- the domain of education

Contested zone

Strategic decisions

Operational decisions



### 3. Types

**-legal (institutional) and non legal (non institutional) participation**

**-direct (face-to-face) and indirect (representation) participation**

**- forms of direct participation**

- individual consultation: face-to-face, talks between individual teacher and his director;
- group consultation: working groups in schools;
- individual delegation: individual teachers receive rights and responsibilities to do part of the work independently without feedback to the director;
- group delegation: working group of teachers receive the right to do part of their job without feedback to the director.

## **4. Participation and effectiveness of decision-making**

Participation as such is not a guarantee for more effectiveness in decision-making. Three conditions are important to attain more effectiveness.

1. Teachers should be taught new skills to participate in the process of decision-making.
2. It is also necessary that teachers are well informed about the organisation and the decisions that have to be taken.
3. Teachers should be rewarded for the work they have done within the participation process.

# 6. What to do?

## 6.1. Legal participation councils

### Problems to avoid

- Vague description of the task of the Council
- the director refuses to share the decision-making
- the director or some teachers are dominating the meetings
- members leaving the meeting
- weak information, also information that only comes from the director
- conservatism of the members
- a lack of training
- self interest of the parents
- a high turnover



## **Strategies to improve these councils**

### **- visible and clear influence**

- clear definition of the role of the Council
- minimum legal rights
- a small number of competences is better than too many
- a procedure for solving complaints
- the director should not be the chairman
- teachers should not act as parents in a Council of the school where they work
- provide a budget
- if the teachers are involved in the collection of funding, give them information about the use of the funds
- make a mission statement
- make a set of internal rules
- make a strategy for communication and decide at the end of the meeting what will be communicated
- evaluate
- use questionnaires to collect information from parents and staff

### **- measures against leaving the council**

- **improve the competence by training and information**
- **effectiveness of meetings**

## **Professionalisation as the instrument to attain strategic participation**

1. A Council should work on the development of a mission.
2. If the council wants to guide, it should collect enough information.
3. The council should have the right to take initiatives..
4. If decisions have to be taken the Participatory Council should be involved very early in the process.
5. It is the task of the council to analyse how decisions are taken in the school.
6. It should be checked if the decisions taken by the director are really executed.
7. School councils should make their own plan of management.
8. The members of the Council should pay attention to all the stakeholders.
9. The council should be embedded in a network.
10. Good deliberation is important. Regular evaluation of the deliberation within the meetings is important.



## **Some remarks concerning the position of the unions**

- Teachers have no clear idea about the influence of the unions in schools

Union representatives are using several **strategies**

### **Some examples**

A. In a school with reciprocal understanding and cooperation

1. as participant in the staff council (without being a member)
2. by frequent personal, formal and informal contacts with the headmaster and other persons in charge of the organization of work in the school
3. by a flexible interpretation of the statute of the representative
4. by contact with the organizing authority



B. In a school where opposition between the school director and the unions is

1. informal contact with persons in charge of parts of school administration
2. participation in councils as an observer, and control of the decisions
3. critical remarks on parts of the school policy
4. formal contact with the headmaster
5. stressing their legal rights in meetings with the organizing authority

## 6.2. Participation

### Indirect participation

- if there are not sufficient candidates for the election, let the participants vote about the accepted candidates
- to elect participants in the non legal indirect participation councils, all teachers of the school should be candidate
- make enough teachers member of the non legal indirect participation councils (but not too many)
- make sure that the representative is member of the non legal indirect participation councils
- the school needs a central Participation Council; participation might be direct or indirect
- if there is no Participation Council, the staff meeting should regularly meet
- make as many teachers as possible members of working groups



- construct a good communication system
- teachers and others should be consulted before the meeting of an indirect Participation Council
- improve the expertise of participating teachers by in service training
- make a planning for a year and evaluate regularly
- explain the mission of the school
- value the teachers for their contribution in the participation process
- do not give a chance for discussion of personal problems in a meeting
- teachers are not supposed to participate in everything

## **Non legal participation**

- apply the rules of formal organisation also in informal participation councils (agenda, information, communication, etc)

### **6.3. Additional conditions for participatory leadership**

- grant real influence in the decision-making to the teachers
- participants in the decision-making process should have good information
- decision-making takes time
- risks connected with the chance to deliberation
- there should be openness for compromise



## 6.4. School as a learning organisation of professionals

### **Characteristics of a “professional learning community”:**

- dialogue and reflection: a critical dialogue among teachers about teaching and methods of learning etc
- openness of the function: teachers give each other the opportunity to sit in the class and discuss the lesson offered by another teacher;
- sharing of Labour: teachers work together to finish the job.

### **Some organizational conditions have to be met:**

- supportive and shared leadership in the school: teachers are focused on achievement, mission, integral quality assurance and are open for self-evaluation and critique;
- structural conditions: sufficient time, procedures of communication, school should not be too big, nearness of teachers, and means for personal development;
- relational conditions: confidence in each other and solidarity, labour culture in which critique is possible;
- personal conditions: a positive attitude toward the job of teacher, no individualism while executing the function.

## 6.5. Participation: its meaning for school effectiveness

- No clear evidence
- Participation certainly contributes to the improvement of the feeling of professionalism among teachers
- Participation should be combined with **educational innovation**

In this context **policymakers should be warned** for the following:

- when decentralisation in school management is introduced, it happens very often that the change agents only pay attention to the structures, they do not pay enough attention to the daily equipment and daily activities necessary for the success of school improvement;
- it is not sufficient to establish a new structure without paying attention to the development of this new structure; there should be continuous attention for action and for the follow up of the central administration and the lower administration level.



## **6.6. Self-evaluation and its limitations**

**School-based self-evaluation is a process mainly initiated by the school to collect systematic information about the school's functioning, to analyse and judge this information regarding the quality of the school's education and to make recommendations.**

**The final goal of self-evaluation is to make decisions that provide recommendations. Self-evaluation presupposes that internal stakeholders, e.g. school leaders, teachers, parents and pupils, are the most adequate agents to take these decisions**

Is it possible for a school to reflect in an unbiased way (with the help of the head teacher) on its own practice and to take actions consistent with its reflections?